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AUTHOR Franks, Parthenia H.
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the different ways in which Chinese American, Japanese American, Korean American, African American, and European American cultures value and use silence during conversation--the term "silence" is used broadly to denote limited oral speech verbal messages or the usage of fewer words to express feelings, ideas, and thoughts. Pointing out that all the ethnic groups discussed here have high exposure to United States (US) or Western culture, the paper shows glimpses of a few of the prominent features of certain cultures on the behavior of silence during conversation. The paper notes first that silence to some extent is valued within all cultural groups. It then discusses European American culture, the dominant US culture, suggesting that the US has an individualistic culture which uses low-context communication, meaning that information is (1) embedded mainly in the messages transmitted, and (2) is presented directly. The paper then examines African American culture, Japanese American culture, Chinese American culture, and Korean American culture. It states that to be an interculturally competent communicator requires the effort to become more aware of the nuances of another culture's communication style, and it makes three recommendations for silence and intercultural communication competence. (Contains 20 references.) (NKA)

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SILENCE/LISTENING AND INTERCULTURAL DIFFERENCES

by:

Parthenia H. Franks, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Morehouse College
Atlanta, Georgia

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the different ways in which Chinese American, Japanese American, Korean American, African American, and European American cultures, value and use silence during conversation. Here, the term *silence* is used broadly to denote limited oral speech verbal messages or the usage of fewer words to express feelings, ideas, and thoughts. Consideration too is given to the influence which cultural variance has on silence during conversation. Rogers and Steinfalt (1999) emphasize the presence of cultural variance within any given culture, meaning that not all members of a cultural group will exhibit certain communication behaviors attributed to that group. Besides, the more people from one culture are exposed to people from another culture, the more individuals from each culture will adapt and adjust aspects of their own culture-specific behavior so as to promote mutual understanding and acceptance: acculturation (Bailey & Cole, 1998; Lustig & Koester, 1999). As all of the ethnic groups discussed here have high exposure to the U.S. or Western culture, glimpses of a few of the prominent features of certain cultures on the behavior of silence during conversation will be shown.

Prior to looking at the historical and cultural forces which maintain the value and role of talking versus to silence in conversation, it is interesting to note first that silence to some extent is valued within all cultural groups. Researchers, for example, have clearly shown how for many cultures silence is tied into etiquette. In other words, the values which various cultures place upon silence and verbal communication all have to do with etiquette and self-control or politeness. Every culture has developed manners to assist its

members to monitor and control, not only what they are supposed to say and do, but when and how they should speak and act. Communicators who fail to adhere to these courtesy communication norms, these rules of etiquette, are judged harshly and negatively by members of their culture (Callow-Thomas, Cooper & Blake, 1999). In their discussion of politeness, Brown and Levinson in 1987 assert that politeness is universal to all cultures and that it is a way of relating to others in ways that satisfy the human need to be appreciated and protected. These authors further contend that although levels of politeness and ways of being polite may vary across cultures, all people nonetheless have positive and negative face needs which politeness accommodates. In this context, politeness becomes critical whenever the central content of our conversation threatens another person's face. In such situations, politeness serves is to lessen or eliminate potential conversational or relationship problems that could cause a person to lose face.

Silence and the European American/ Western Culture

The dominant culture in a society typically shapes the ways in which the society expresses itself, and in the United States the dominant cultural context (the beliefs, values, and norms that are shared by a large group of people) is a European American one (Lustig & Koester, 1996; Verderber, 1999). With its salient value of individualism, the Unites States (the Western culture) is an example of a culture where facets of individualism are embedded in this culture's present-day attitudes, i.e., on the merits of setting and achieving goals personally and in the workplace. Beyond this, aspects of

individualism are deeply rooted in the Western culture's history, literature, fables, heroic figures, i.e., the cowboy roaming the Great Plains, the self-made man—pulling yourself up by your own boot straps, etc.). In terms of communication, people who subscribe to individualism are inclined to be more expressive and assertive and to advance themselves and disclose more about themselves than individuals who come from collectivistic cultures (i.e., cultures which place primary value on the group as a whole). Consequently, when it comes to their communication style, European Americans value direct language and expression of individual views. They feel that speech is powerful and compelling and that it carries with it results-oriented possibilities (Brydon, & Scott, 2000). In this culture the perception is that talking is associated with intelligence, leadership, and power, whereas silence is often and mistakenly associated with passivity and inferiority (Adler & Rodman, 2000; Rodman & Adler, 1997). Research indicates that this high premium on speech continues among U.S. businessmen who during their negotiations (even with Asian-Americans) value, desire, and rely on directness, openness, and being candid. (Reeves-Ellington, 1993, Samovar & Porter, 2000).

To many European Americans, silence is seldom considered good though from the standpoint of nonverbal communication behavior, silence can communicate powerful messages. For instance, when the silence is between acquaintances, it can indicate that the person is being ignored. Silence can also be a sign of anger, for some people deliberately freeze out people with whom they are furious. Also, silence frequently produces a certain degree of discomfort—people get uncomfortable when three or four people sit together and no one talks (Verderber, 1999; Wood, 2000).

Moreover, from the standpoint of communication context, silence is not ranked high as a conversation skill for European Americans. This is because individualistic culture use low-context communication, meaning that information is (1) embedded mainly in the messages transmitted and (2) is presented directly. Along these lines, listeners from low-context cultures need and expect more detailed and explicit information from the speaker; less effective are subtle and indirect messages. Therefore, as members of a low-context culture, European Americans prize clear and direct communication from the listener as well (Verderber, 1999).

Silence and the African American Culture

The spoken word is considered very important among African Americans (Jaffe, 1995; Lustig & Koester, 1996). In Africa, the oral tradition has always been much stronger than the written tradition. Historically, from the time of the griots, in Africa (the griots were African elders in the tribe who held the history of their specific tribes in their memories), knowledge, attitudes, ideas, and notions were transmitted orally, not through the written word. Griots passed on these memories through storytelling and through poems, fables, prayers, chants proverbs, and sayings. The histories of African societies were concerned not with armies, conquests, and the rise and fall of great nations, but were instead focused on the people themselves and the events surrounding their everyday lives. While many African Americans have adopted Western style communication

behaviors, traces of this value of orality still exit in the African American culture. For example, natural leaders from this culture are expected to make use of language as a powerful rhetorical device and are expected to have oratorical skills (Jaffe, 1995; Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999). Also, among African Americans, there is the expectation of reciprocal talk, making face-to-face communication very important. In this culture, the listener is expected to be proactive, to respond. Silence from this vantage point is seen as a tool with which to prepare the listener to respond. In this regard, silence is not necessarily valued as a separate skill, rather it is seen as a crucial link in the chain of listening. Thus, listening is greatly valued as a vehicle for connecting with the message or with the speaker. So, unlike the European American culture where the message and the sender (speaker) can be separated from the listener, in the African American culture, high value is given to the speaker being *connected* with the listener. This degree of connection also necessitates a certain amount of empathic listening, for African Americans tend to perceive speakers as being more credible when they are emotionally involved with their subjects (Jaffe, 1995).

African Americans too are within the high-context cultural dimension (though less so than are Asian American cultures) where the utmost goal of communication is to feel harmonious and understood from the context of the communication situation. With this communication goal, a high premium is placed on empathic listening. Here again, for members of the African American culture, the value of silence rests in its ability to foster listening. (Lumsden & Lumsden, 1977).

Collectivism (as opposed to individualism) is also a part of the African American's cultural background. This sense of collectivism reinforces this culture's value of harmony and solidarity and emphasizes group goals over those of individuals. Members of this culture are more likely to belong to in-groups or collectives that are supposed to look after them in exchange for their loyalty to the group. (Verderber, 1999).

Silence and the Japanese American Culture

In the Japanese culture silence is golden and is generally associated with wisdom and power. A person who talks too much and self-discloses a great deal is considered less powerful than one who keeps personal opinions and knowledge private. In fact, in Japan and in Southeast Asia countries people consider high verbalization as an invasion of privacy and believe that telling one's problems to a stranger would mean loss of face. Jaffe, 1995; Lucas, 1998). Face-saving is crucial to the Japanese way of life, and through the culture's tremendous value of face-saving (or saving the dignity of both the speaker and the listener) silence is encouraged. During communication interactions, therefore, silence together with indirect language is used to save embarrassment, to ease tension, and to respect the feelings of the speaker. The rationale here is that what you don't say cannot hurt anyone. On the other hand, in the Western culture, this silence for the sake of saving face may be misconstrued as withholding information or feelings (Samovar, Port & Stefani, 1998).

The Asian Americans' view of silence can also be understood from their perspective on etiquette, where to be polite, one must focus, pause, and take extra time to behave according to the norms and rules of the Japanese society's expectations. Calloway-Thomas, Cooper & Black, 1999). In keeping with these social norms, social relationships are expressed in the Japanese language in that the Japanese use language to focus on human relationships and to communicate status. Hence, separate vocabularies are used for addressing authority figures, peers, and subordinates. In contrast, Western languages emphasize objects or referents and their logical relationships (Samovar, Port & Stefani, 1998).

Additionally, Japanese rank high as a high-context culture; individuals from high-context cultures are highly attentive to the speaker's delivery as well as to the entire communication environment when they try to interpret the speaker's meaning. As a consequent, Japanese Americans are less impressed by a speaker who speaks openly about his or her own accomplishments. Similarly, as members of a high-context culture, they (1) expect others to know how they are thinking and feeling and (2) they present messages indirectly (Verderber, 1999). Likewise, they expect and value more indirect ways of establishing understanding and credibility (Beebe & Beebe, 2000).

Silence and the Chinese American Culture

As do other cultures from Southeast Asia, Chinese Americans also prefer silence over talking. In this culture, the less talkative person is regarded more favorably that than the

talkative one. The Chinese's view of life is situation-oriented, seeing events in relation to a broad-based totality, nature-oriented point of view. In contrast, the Western view is to see things on an either/or, yes/no continuum. Moreover, as a member of a culture which greatly values collectivism, Chinese Americans place a great deal of value on interpersonal relations, for achieving collaborative and harmonious relationships also reinforces the Chinese standard of being a good and moral person. Maintaining the belief that it is important to be concerned about how they will be perceived by others, to the Chinese American, group disapproval and the loss of face evoke shame and therefore, must be avoided. In the Chinese American culture, things are viewed from a collective point of view. Here again, language is used to show respect for the feelings of others and there is a use of indirect communication so as to avoid any embarrass, displeasure, or shame on either the speaker's or listener's part (Calloway-Thomas, Cooper & Blake, 1999; Samovar, Port & Stefani, 1998).

Silence and the Korean American Culture

Korean Americans too view silence from a highly positive standpoint—as a skill/tool to promote harmony and politeness. In Korean spoken words are regarded with suspicion and disregard. The influence of Confucian values where true communication is believed to occur from feeling, not from talking, is significant in Korean Americans. Confucian and Buddist teachings have had the effect of devaluing spoken language while making written communication highly valued. This preference for the written word over the spoken word is revealed from a social status perspective where the spoken words were

apt to run on and on, to be less prestigious. In this light, scholars read, menials spoke (Lustig & Koester, 1996). Therefore, whereas the Western culture values self-expression and clear and precise communication of ideas, feelings and thoughts, the Korean culture places primary value on the consideration of others. In this culture one of the greatest tragedies is to be shamed or to feel ashamed. Consequently, as with the Japanese Americans, to Korean Americans, face-saving is critical and there is always the goal to not cause someone to feel shame (Samovar, Port & Stefani, 1998).

PERSPECTIVE

Being an interculturally competent communicator requires the effort to become more aware of the nuances of another culture's communication style. To achieve this, we must assume that cultures differ in their communication expectations—that some cultures value high verbal communication behavior while other cultures value silence (low verbal communication behavior). Accepting such linguistic variation adds richness to our life experiences and also allows us to interact more efficiently and smoothly with those whose cultural backgrounds are different from our own. As Fujishin (1997) so aptly expresses, in showing intercultural communication competence, we must be sensitive to the communication that is going on around us and we must take the leadership in accepting and responding appropriately to cross cultural communication behaviors. Moreover, if our goal is effective communication, we must be cognizant of cultural expectations; we must be flexible and willing to avoid miscommunication because not

doing so is disrespectful in that it denies the authentication of cultural groups different from our own (Lucas, 1998; Jabusch & Littlejohn, 1995).

SILENCE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

1. Make a decision to be mindful-to be fully engaged in the moment by emptying the mind of thoughts, ideas, and plans so that you are open to listening to another—attend fully, totally, and without diversion (Wood, 2000).

2. Concentrate on the person with whom you are communicating—make yourself want to concentrate on this person, on what she or he is saying and feeling (Wood, 2000).

3. Promote a multivocal society (as summarized by Henry Louis Gates, chair of the Afro-American Studies Program, Harvard University): a society where cultural groups hold divided opinions, yet use their unique perspectives to build a civic and caring culture that accommodates both differences and commonalities (Jaffe, 1995).

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